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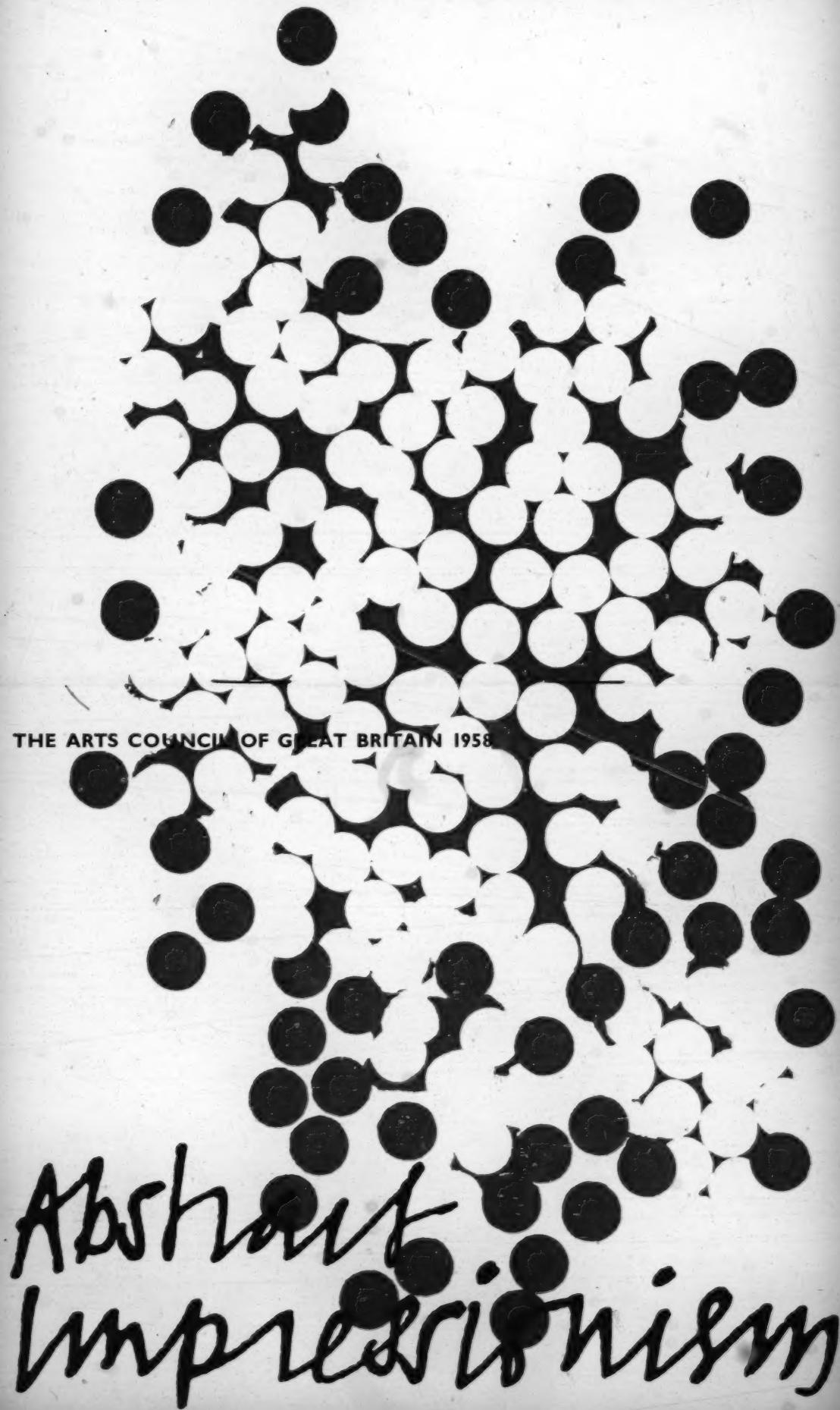

THE ARTS COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN 1958
About
Impressionism

Abstract Impressionism

ROSEMARIE BECK NORMAN BLUHM LAWRENCE CALCAGNO
BERNARD COHEN HAROLD COHEN JAMES DANIELS
NICOLAS DE STAËL SAM FRANCIS PHILIP GUSTON PATRICK HERON
WYNN HITCHENS ANGELO IPPOLITO PETER KINLEY PETER LANYON
ANDRE MASSON JOAN MITCHELL ROBERTO MORNIHAN
STEPHEN PACE WALTER PLATE JEAN-PAUL RIOPELLE
MIRIAM SCHAPIRO RICHARD SMITH PIERRE TAL COAT

Abstract Impressionism

AN EXHIBITION OF RECENT PAINTINGS ARRANGED BY LAWRENCE ALLOWAY AND HAROLD COHEN

Abstract Impressionism

11-28 JUNE 1958 ARTS COUNCIL GALLERY 4 ST. JAMES'S SQUARE LONDON SW1

FOREWORD

The idea of bringing together this group of paintings from three countries to show them under the title of Abstract Impressionism was conceived by the Department of Fine Art in the University of Nottingham under the direction of Mr. Alastair Smart, Head of the Department. The theme reveals the adventurous spirit of this young Department, and reflects the large measure of support and encouragement that it receives from the university authorities in carrying out its appointed task of promoting a greater knowledge and understanding of the visual arts among members of the University and of the general public (who are admitted to the admirable galleries in the University's new Portland Building). It is gratifying to note that this exhibition is only one of a number that the Department has itself organised and shown there in the past eighteen months.

For allowing us to reprint his able introduction, written originally for the Nottingham catalogue, we thank Mr. Lawrence Alloway who with Mr. Harold Cohen, Fellow in Fine Art at the University, undertook the organisation of the exhibition for Nottingham.

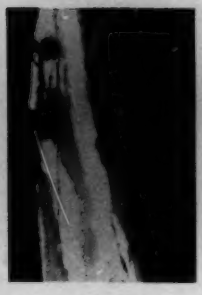
The Arts Council must also thank the American Embassy, and in particular Mr. Stefan Munsing, for arranging an extension on the loan of a number of pictures which they had shipped from the United States specially for the Nottingham exhibition and for assistance in locating several pictures; Mr. Richard Smith who designed the catalogue and poster; Mr. Peter Cochrane for assistance in locating some of the pictures; and the following private collectors and galleries for the loan of paintings: Mr. E. Estorick, Mr. E. J. Power, the Andre Emmerich Gallery, the Gimpel Fils Gallery, the Martha Jackson Gallery, the Leicester Galleries, the Periodot Gallery, the Redfern Gallery, the Roland, Browse and Delbanco Gallery, the Bertha Schaefer Gallery, the Stable Gallery and Arthur Tooth and Sons Ltd. P.J.

Mitchell: Hudson River Day Line

SOME NOTES ON ABSTRACT IMPRESSIONISM

LAWRENCE ALLOWAY

De Stael: Seascape



Calcagno: Warrior River, 3

Smith: Noplace

Lanyon: Gull Shore

WORDS

The term Abstract Impressionism seems to have been coined by Elaine De Kooning in 1951 at the Arts Club, 8th Street, New York[1]. What she meant by it can be seen from this quotation:

> Retaining the quiet uniform pattern of strokes that spread over the canvas without climax or emphasis, these followers keep the Impressionist manner of looking at a scene but leave out the scene . . . As the Impressionists attempted to deal with the optical effects of nature, the followers are interested in the optical effects of spiritual states, thereby giving an old style a new subject[2].

Louis Finkelstein widens this definition a little, writing of the new artists:

> the kind of vision in which they are involved is basically Impressionist, recasting abstraction into something much more concerned with the qualities of perception of light, space and air than the surface of the painting[3].

There is no organised group with a programme and the name unites loosely numerous artists, some of whom paint *sur le motif*, some of whom do not. Abstract impressionism is a tendency within the general movement of post-war painterliness.

The late impressionism of Monet became more 'abstract'; nature continued to be the subject, of course, but the marks and the pigment took on an increasing importance. The revival of interest in Monet has coincided with the emergence of abstract impressionism. The connection between impressionism and the new painting lies not only in the painting of light but also in the use of conspicuous paint to refer to nature. The spectator must recognise simultaneously the physical events on the surface of the picture and the references to something apart from the picture, the lily ponds in the case of Monet. Later impressionist landscapes are often on the edge of turning into paint; conversely in abstract impressionist pictures the free, sensual paint, liberated by action painting, turns into landscapes all the time.

NATURE

In abstract impressionism nature does not have one simple role. The artist can start from nature, defined as the world outside the artist, as De Stael did; he declared 'I do not paint before looking'[4]. Nature can be a particular spot before which the painter works. It can also be a general sum of sky and horizon, for example, or an ideal garden, the latest form of the ingrained taste for pastoral. Nature may be in memory and not physically present at the time of painting: Riopelle, for example, painted a series of snow pictures *after* a visit to Austria. However, allusions to nature, though important, are not allowed to disrupt the autonomy of the paint.

Nature may be, however, not the point of departure but of arrival. From the gesture the artist makes on the canvas an image may appear, not as an irrelevance but as a completion of his activity. Numerous post-war painters have been interested in the emergence of the image and in finding a way to give it body without taking it out of the bed of paint. This is what Philip Guston refers to when he writes:

> Even as one travels in painting towards a state of 'unfreedom' where only certain things can happen, unaccountably the unknown and free must appear[5].

Common to both approaches is the active role of the paint. De Stael, for example, had a sharp eye for places but he abstracted from them only those aspects which he could use as paint shapes. Paint determines the appearance of the world in the painting: signs of nature are modifications of the paint. Jean Bazaine, a typical School of Paris abstract impressionist, describes the aspects of nature which he can abstract without inhibiting his painterly means:

> I see a tree, a landscape or even a human face as the intricate network of its direction or as its lines of forces (or else its volumes of light, quite apart from the outlines . . .)[6].

Also, indirection must be expected, as Pierre Schneider writes of Tal Coat:

> Nature is his subject. But he shuns direct representation of it as a kind of cruelty: like setting traps[7].

This approach in Tal Coat, as in Rouve, serves both as a subtle approach to landscape and as a way of painting in which the pigment defines the picture physically, apart from references.

A risk, not to the painters but to their spectators, is to limit the meaning of the word 'nature' to mean landscapes free of human occupancy. But as Joan Mitchell wrote:

> I am very much influenced by nature as you define it. However, I do not necessarily distinguish it from 'man-made' nature—a city is as strange as a tree . . . I paint from remembered landscapes that I carry with me—and remembered feelings of them which of course become transformed[8].

Richard Smith's aptly-titled *Noplace*, for example, is a spatial picture but with non-associative colour, so that a space is created but pastoral references are kept down. Abstract impressionism, therefore, however individuals within the tendency may treat it, is not a simple return to nature, as if this had ever been a missing factor in action painting. It is, on the contrary, a development of *some* of the potentialities present in Action Painting.

The variability of the point at which nature enters the painting process is a new factor in art, because previously nature's place, just beyond the artist's canvas and as visible to the spectator as to the artist, was known from the beginning. Nature, in abstract impressionism, is usually landscape (because landscape is the nearest analogue

Francis: White Painting

Tal Coat: Landscape

Masson: Bather in Waterfall

H. Cohen: Happy Day (Detail)

to allover paint) but interiors and still life are common (figure subjects are rare).

SPACE

A painting is a surface that an artist penetrates. The opening of the picture plane, however, against which so many forms have been flattened (like steam-rollered figures in cartoon films), does not necessarily leave a space to be filled with solid bodies at various distances between the horizon and the front edge of the picture. As Joan Mitchell has said, 'Lines can't just float in representational space'[9]. The exploration of space is at the heart of abstract impressionism but it is a space without orthogonals. Qualities of light and colour, freed of specific descriptive functions, open the picture. Space is created by aerial- and texture-perspective, not by size- or linear-perspective. Aerial perspective, blueing, filmy, hazy, is a cue for distance. Texture differences imply a change of direction in a modelled form. Variations of shading change the relation of a form to a light source. Or, the forms of a painting may contain their own light-source (Sam Francis, for example), like a radioactive element.

All these factors, freed of other types of spatial organisation, are indicators of space, defined not by objects but by paint. Space can be represented not as an empty container waiting for occupancy but as a substance: movement underwater or watching clouds provide two analogies. At the horizon objects become indiscriminable. In abstract impressionism the point of indiscriminability is advanced to the picture plane itself, so that there is fluctuating distance wherever the eye looks at the painted surface. Beginnings and ends are hard to find. There is, as Louis Finkelstein put it, a 'continuity of spatial activity' in terms of sequences of texture, density, overlapping.

It is, of course, impossible not to read paint marks and colour areas as spaces. Such marks are spontaneous cues of direction and distance. The originality of abstract impressionism is to organise this basic property of marks and paint and make by its means (advancing and receding planes of colour, etc.) luminous structures of paint and space. Ivon Hitchens writes that 'a cow, tree, and horse are not really separate objects, but one unity and scale in space'. Thus, even pictures closely based on nature, as his are, may reveal this kind of tangible space. Hitchens thinks less in terms of objects than in terms of movements, 'so that the design flows from side to side, up-down, and in and out'[10].

Space is a key word in post-war art, as form was a key word of early 20th-century esthetics. It is no longer a space dependent on 'the meaning of a terrain or a floor'[11] but space as substance. Such an idea of space is not confined to abstract impressionism. It is present in Giacometti's paintings, where it is invested with a strong psychological atmosphere in which figures are surrounded by a penumbra that blurs the distinction between them and the space around. Sam Francis, like Norman Bluhm and Richard Smith[12], is an essentially spatial painter, though there are neither objects nor points of reference in his vaporous or blazing pictures.

LIGHT[13]

Just as we read marks as space we read colour as light, because no surface can be seen unless it is illuminated, however faintly. Colour as light inevitably implies space and it hollows pictures with a meteor's flash or a petal's drift. This means that colour can be separated in artistic usage from the scientific and pseudo-scientific colour theories with which modern art used to be saddled (Delaunay, for example).

The light, though free of objects, often connotes natural effects, of noon, of dusk, effects of weather (the earlier works of Bernard Cohen, for example), the gradient of planes, such as the sea or the sky (Patrick Heron). Sometimes the effect is of light directed into the painter's face, with glare dissolving detail. In other pictures light is diffused and smoky. There is a strong lyrical streak in many of the painters involved: clouds, flowers, gardens, water, glaciers, rocks, derived partly from Klee, partly from the French tendency to think of artists as poets.

Every art movement carries a danger attendant on its special skills and beauty; the risk of abstract impressionism is to get too discreet, too meditative, too near to, say, Calvert's idyllic Greece. The typical abstract impressionist picture, however, has as forceful a presence as any other and colour relations need be no vaguer than linear ones.

The light in abstract impressionist pictures, though referring to nature, often through a screen of sentiment, does not act in one-to-one references. It is the product of the paint and not merely the 'time of the day' trans-figured.

The horizon is often absent from abstract impressionist pictures, from Riopelle and Tal Coat, as from Monet's lily ponds. Since the solidity of bodies has been subsumed by all-overness the ground they occupied is not needed. When the horizon is retained, as by De Stael or Kinley, the sky above and the ground below that orientation-giving line usually have the same weight.

INFLUENCES

In the earlier phases of modern art, when form (as something solid) and not space was the challenge, the influential artists of the past were 'architectural'. The new influences are painterly. The special case of Monet, whose late works are being reinterpreted, has been mentioned but there are others. Bonnard has influenced two artists as different as Francis and Harold Cohen. Turner's late works in which he destroyed form by dramatic light influenced both Masson and De Stael. De Stael was also influenced by Manet (who, significantly, subtracted the density from objects and painted them as flat, crisp skins). 'Free vast sky landscape seascape Bonington Corot Lorraine', wrote De Stael in a letter. Cézanne's late works, especially his watercolours, with their elliptical treatment of weightless forms, influenced Tal Coat and Masson.

School of Paris abstract impressionism tends (excluding the so-called School of Aix—Masson and Tal Coat) to be more formal than the American.

Plate: Untitled

In England there are cases of both painterly freedom and of underlying formality. The earlier works of Harold Cohen and Daniels, for example, in which space was measured by points, underlies their later work like a hidden trellis under foliage. In the United States and Europe abstract impressionism is useful both to artists who want to make images out of action painting and to artists who want to keep contact with nature as a fund of references. Common to both groups, whether their roots are in the act of painting or in allusive abstraction, is a sensuous use of paint to create, by the evocation of light and atmosphere, a world of space.

[1] Letter from Thomas B. Hess to the author.

[2] Elaine De Kooning, *Subject: What, How or Who?* (Art News, 54, 2, 1956).

[3] Louis Finkelstein, *New Look: Abstract-Impressionism* (Art News, 55, 1, 1956).

[4] *Nicolas De Staël*, exhibition catalogue (Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1956).

[5] Philip Guston, exhibition catalogue, *12 Americans* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1956).

[6] *Jean Bazaine* (Paris, 1953).

[7] Pierre Schneider, *Tal Coat* (Paris Review, 15, 1957).

[8] *Nature in Abstraction*, exhibition catalogue (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1958).

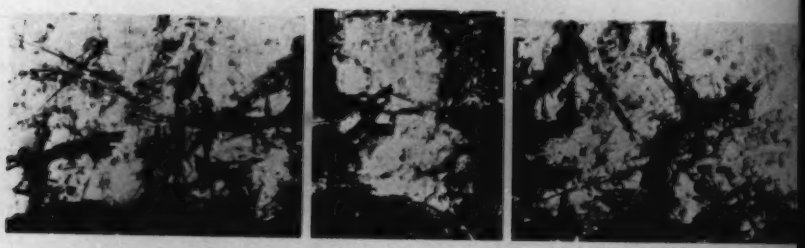
[9] Irving Sandler, *Mitchell Paints a Picture* (Art News, 56, 6, 1957).

[10] Ivon Hitchens, *Notes on Painting* (Ark, 18, 1956).

[11] J. J. Gibson, *The Perception of the Visual World* (London, 1950).

[12] Roger Coleman, *Richard Smith—the Image of Space* (Ark 20, 1957).

[13] Edward Corbett in exhibition catalogue *Abstract Impressionists*, (Mount Holyoke College, Massachusetts, 1957) named light as the over-riding concern of the painters.



Riopelle: Triptych

Ippolito: Provincetown Dunes

CATALOGUE

Measurements are given in inches, height precedes width. Medium oil on canvas unless otherwise stated. Some of the pictures are for sale. Enquiries should be addressed to the Director of Art, Arts Council of Great Britain, 4 St. James's Square, London S.W.1.

1 ROSEMARIE BECK
(New York, 1923)
House of the Sun, 3
(1956) 71 × 30 Persidot Gallery

2 NORMAN BLUHM
(U.S.A., 1921)
Painting Blue, 2
(1956) 59½ × 32 Gimpel Fils Gallery

3 LAWRENCE CALCAGNO
(San Francisco, 1916)
Warrior River, 3
(1956) 47½ × 32 Board Martha Jackson Gallery

4 BERNARD COHEN
(London, 1932)
Painting, 7
(1958) 72 × 60 Gimpel Fils Gallery

5 HAROLD COHEN
(London, 1928)
Happy Day
(1958) 93 × 141 Gimpel Fils Gallery

6 BARRY DANIELS
(London, 1931)
Landscape
(1958) 45 × 46 Roland, Browse and Delbanco Gallery

7 NICOLAS DE STAEL
(St. Petersburg, 1914-1955)
Channel at Gravelines
(1954) 29 × 39 E. J. Power, Esq.

8 Seascape
(1955) 29 × 39½ E. J. Power, Esq.

9 SAM FRANCIS
(California, 1923)
White Painting
(c. 1951) 61 × 37½ Gimpel Fils Gallery

10 Painting
(1957) 96 × 174 Gimpel Fils Gallery

11 PHILIP GUSTON
(Montreal, 1913)
Magician's Table
(1957) 27 × 36 Board Arthur Tooth and Sons Ltd.

12 The Clock, 2
(1957) 25 × 36 Board E. Estorick, Esq.

13 PATRICK HERON
(Leeds, 1920)
Black, Green and Red
(1958) 72 × 56 Redfern Gallery

14 IVON HITCHENS
(London, 1893)
Trees over a Canal
(1957) 16½ × 43 Gimpel Fils Gallery

15 ANGELO IPPOLITO
(Italy, 1922)
Provincetown Dunes
(1957) 63 × 78 Bertha Schaefer Gallery

16 PETER KINLEY
(Vienna, 1926)
The Serpentine
(1956) 30 × 40 Gimpel Fils Gallery

17 PETER LANYON
(St. Ives, 1918)
Gull Shore
(1957) 48 × 72 Board Gimpel Fils Gallery

18 ANDRE MASSON
(France, 1896)
Bather in Waterfall
(1938) 32×23¼ Leicester Galleries

19 RODRIGO MOYNIHAN
(Canary Islands, 1910)
Black and Red Ovals
(1937) 36¼×28¾ Redfern Gallery

20 JOAN MITCHELL
(Chicago, 1926)
Hudson River Day Line
(1956) 79×83 Stable Gallery

21 STEPHEN PACE
(Missouri, 1918)
Aftermath 55-19
(1957) 71×55

22 WALTER PLATE
(New York, 1921)
Untitled
(1955) 48×72 Board Stable Gallery

23 JEAN-PAUL RIOPELLE
(Montréal, 1923)
Triptych
(c 1956) Wings 38¾×32¼ Centre 39¾×32¼ Gimpel Fils Gallery

24 MIRIAM SCHAPIRO
Idyll, 2
(1956) 60×72 Andre Emmerich Gallery

25 RICHARD SMITH
(Letchworth, 1931)
Noplace
(1958) 48×72 Board

26 PIERRE TAL COAT
(Brittany, 1905)
Landscape
(1937) 21¼×28¾ Leicester Galleries